DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 585 EC 306 925

AUTHOR	LaPlante, Mitchell P.
TITLE	How Many Americans Have a Disability? Disability Statistics Abstract Number 5.
INSTITUTION	California Univ., San Francisco. Inst. for Health and Aging.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1992-06-00
NOTE	5p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adults; *Census Figures; Children; *Disabilities; *Incidence; National Surveys; *Residential Institutions; Severity (of Disability); Sex Differences; Statistical Surveys
IDENTIFIERS	Americans with Disabilities Act 1990; National Health Interview Survey

ABSTRACT

This statistical abstract focuses on how many Americans have a disability. It begins by defining "disability" according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Data are presented from the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) that provide the number of Americans with disabilities most consistent with the ADA definition. Graphs are provided for the following information: (1) activity limitation by age and gender; (2) prevalence of impairments causing activity limitation in the United States in 1990; and (3) the number of people with disabilities in the United States in 1990 by residence. The information indicates that in 1990 there were 22.9 million people of all ages living in households that were limited in a major activity. An additional 11.9 million people are estimated to have "nonmajor" activity limitations. According to NHIS data, the three disabling impairments that rank at the top in prevalence are orthopedic impairments, arthritis, and heart disease. Finally, data from the 1990 Census indicate that 2.3 million residents of institutions could be considered to have a disability. (CR)

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Disability Statistics Abstract
Number 5

How Many Americans Have a Disability?

by Mitchell P. LaPlante

People with disabilities can be defined broadly as those with limitations in human actions or activities due to physical or mental impairments.[1] Under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), a person with a disability is defined as one with "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual."[2] As defined by regulations implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973—the legal antecedent of the ADA—physical impairments include "any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss"[3] affecting the major body systems of the human organism. Mental impairments include "any mental or psychological disorder, such as mental retardation, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness, and specific learning disabilities."[4] By the qualifying words "substantial" and "major life activity," the ADA definition intends to focus on significant limitations in human activities:

> A physical or mental impairment does not constitute a disability under . . . the definition for purposes of the ADA unless its severity is such that it results in a "substantial limitation in one or more major life activities." A "major life activity" means functions such as caring for one's self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, working, and participating in community activities. . . .
>
> A person is considered an individual with a disability ... when the individual's important life activities are restricted as to the conditions, manner, or duration under which they can be performed in comparison to most people.[5]

The ADA definition is quite broad, including not just those who cannot perform one or more major life activities, but those who have difficulty performing them as others usually do. Furthermore, the ADA definition also includes people who have had an activity limiting impairment in the past but are now recovered and people regarded by others as having an impairment that limits their activities.

People with disabilities living in households

Of the nation's major surveys, the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) provides an estimate of the number of Americans with disabilities that is most consistent with the ADA definition. A large national sample survey of noninstitutionalized people in the United States, the NHIS interviews people to determine whether they currently have a limitation in the major activities associated with their particular age group, or are limited in other activities (called "nonmajor" activities) because of a physical or mental impairment lasting or expected to last at least three months. For children under age five, major activity is ordinary play. For children age five through seventeen, major activity is attending school. For people age eighteen through sixty-nine, major activity is

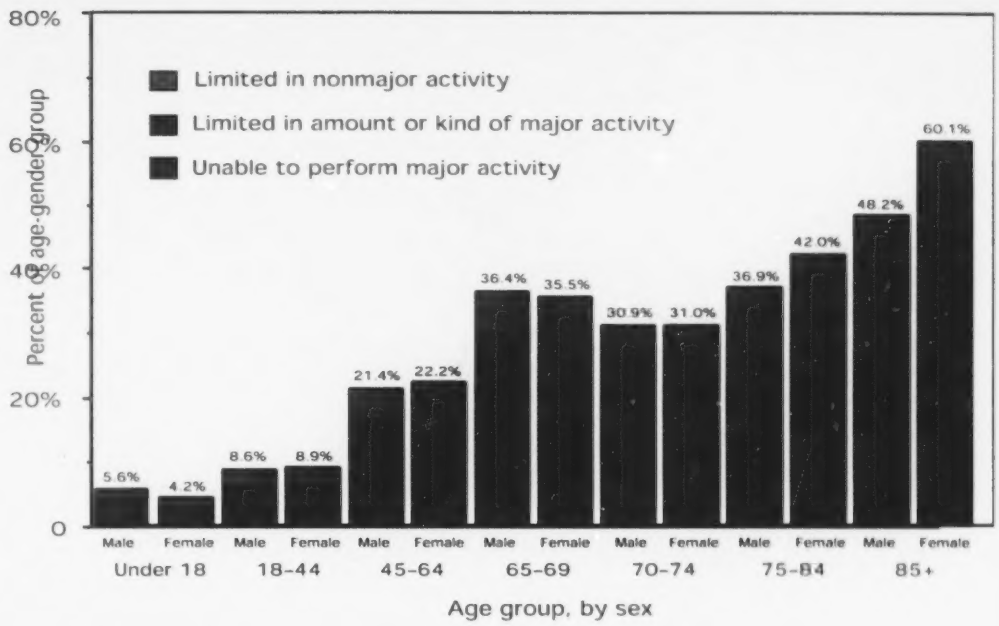
Disability Statistics Program,
University of California,
San Francisco

Published by U.S. Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR)

Number 5, June 1992.

EC 306925

FIGURE 1. Activity limitation by age and gender



Source: National Health Interview Survey, 1990. Author's tabulations from public use tapes.

work ing or keeping house, and for people age seventy and over, major activity is independent living, including bathing, shopping, dressing, eating, and other activities related to living in the community.

From the 1990 NHIS, it is estimated that 22.9 million people of all ages living in households are limited in major activity. An additional 10.9 million people are estimated to have "nonmajor" activity limitations.[6] The latter estimate is based on any limitation in any activity important to an individual and includes difficulty performing civic, church, and recreational activities. Most, if not all people with "nonmajor" limitations would be covered by the ADA. Thus, the total number of people with disabilities living in households is 33.8 million, or 13.7 percent of all the 246 million people in the US (excluding residents of institutions). Figure 1 shows the percent of the population limited in activity by age and gender. Women are more likely than men at ages seventy-five and older to have a disability. Under age seventy, men are more likely than women to be limited in major activity.

It is important to distinguish impairments that are minor and do not cause disability from those that do cause disability. Many people with minimal impairments, such as the absence of a tip of one finger or with a disease at an early stage—such as hypertension that is controlled with medication— do not generally experience limitation in activity. These people are therefore seldom counted as individuals with a disability.

In the ADA legislation, 43 million Americans were cited as having disablities.[7] Where did this estimate come from? The figure is obtained from the 1979 NHIS and is based on an estimated 43.8 million people with visual, hearing, orthopedic, and other anatomical impairments, regardless of whether the impairments caused them to be limited in activity.[8,9] Here the distinction between impairment and activity limitation is important. Visual, hearing, and anatomical impairments range from minimal to severe. Many people with minimal impairments are not limited in activity and would not be considered to have a disability.

Furthermore, the 43 million figure excludes millions of people with significant limitation in activity due to chronic diseases such as AIDS and

arthritis. The 1990 NHIS estimate of 33.8 million people limited in activity includes all types of impairments causing activity limitation.

Impairments causing disability

According to 1990 NHIS data, the three disabling impairments ranking at the top in prevalence are orthopedic impairments, arthritis, and heart disease. These three impairments are reported as the main cause of activity limitation by nearly 40 percent of all people with a disability (Table 1). Most activity limitation is caused by physical impairments—under 8 percent is caused by mental impairments. However, the contribution of mental impairments may be under-reported.

TABLE 1. Prevalence of impairments causing activity limitation in the United States, 1990

Main cause	Number of people in 1000's	Percent of people limited in activity
Orthopedic impairments	5,873	17.4
Arthritis	4,010	11.9
Heart disease	3,430	10.2
Intervertebral disk disorders	1,762	5.2
Asthma	1,710	5.1
Nervous disorders	1,560	4.6
Mental disorders	1,525	4.5
Visual impairments	1,347	4.0
Mental retardation	1,069	3.2
Diabetes	1,032	3.1
Hypertension	837	2.5
Cerebrovascular disease	679	2.0
Hearing impairments	649	1.9
Emphysema	560	1.7
Osteoporosis/bone disorders	322	1.0
All impairments	33,753	100.0

Source: National Health Interview Survey, 1990. Author's tabulations from public use tapes.

Persons with disabilities living in institutions

For a comprehensive estimate of the number of people with disabilities in the total US population, people residing in institutions must be considered. Data from the 1990 Census indicate that 2.3 million residents of institutions could be considered to have a disability. This includes 1.8 million people in nursing homes; 129,000 in mental hospitals; and 214,000 in institutions caring mainly for people with mental retardation or developmental delay (mr/dd). Furthermore, if we assume, for lack of other data, that people in correctional facilities have the same rate of limitation as the noninstitutional population (13.7 percent), this adds an additional 153,000 people (Table 2).

This population is rapidly increasing as the general prison population grew 140 percent from 1980 to 1990. The rate of institutionalization in long term care facilities has remained constant at 8.9 per 1,000 people. It is assumed that few active duty military have a disability.

Describing precisely the types of impairments in the institutional population as a whole is complex. However, about 66 percent of people in nursing homes have mental impairments[10] as would most persons in mental hospitals and mr/dd facilities. Thus, mental impairment is a frequent cause of disability in the institutional population.

A comprehensive estimate of the number of people with disabilities then is 36.1 million in 1990, or 14.5 percent of the 246 million people residing in the US. This is the population covered by the ADA.

TABLE 2. Number of people with disabilities in the United States in 1990 by residence

Nursing homes	1,800,000
Mental hospitals	129,000
Correctional institutions	153,000
Institutions for mental retardation and developmental delay (mr/dd)	214,000
Total institutionalized population	2.3 million
Noninstitutionalized population	33.8 million
Total population with disability	36.1 million

Source: 1990 Census of Population and Housing; 1990 National Health Interview Survey.

Notes

1. LaPlante, M. P. (1991). The demographics of disability. THE MILBANK QUARTERLY, 2(55), 55-77.
2. ADA, §3 (2)(A), 42 U.S.C. §12102 (2)(A).
3. 45 C.F.R.§84.3 (j)(2)(i)
4. Ibid.
5. H.R. Rep. No. 485, 101st Cong., 2nd Sess. Part 2, 52 (1990); see also S. Rep. No. 116, 101st Cong., 1st Sess. 22-23 (1989).
6. Adams, P. F., & Benson, V. (1991). Current estimates from the National Health Interview Survey, 1990. VITAL HEALTH STAT, 10(181), 1-212.
7. ADA, §2 (a)(1), 42 U.S.C. §12101 (a)(1).
8. Smith, M.F. (1992). Persons with Disabilities in the U.S.: Statistical summary. Washington DC: Congressional Research Service. The figure has been truncated rather than rounded.
9. Mathematica Policy Research. (1984). Digest of Data on Persons with Disabilities. Washington, DC: National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research.
10. Hing, E. (1989). Nursing Home Utilization by Current Residents: United States, 1985. VITAL HEALTH STAT, 13(102).

Credits

The Disability Statistics Abstract series is produced by the Disability Statisics Program, Institute for Health and Aging, University of California, 201 Filbert Street, Suite 500, San Francisco, CA 94133-3203, with funding from NIDRR. Layout assistance by Janet Smith and Juliana Cyril.

This abstract is one of a series presenting information from published sources on disability in the U.S. Statistics presented here are subject to both sampling and nonsampling error. Estimates with low statistical reliabilty (standard error > 30% of the estimate) are flagged with an asterisk. All comparisons mentioned in this abstract are statistically significant at the .10 level of significance or better unless noted otherwise. Comparisons and relationships discussed may be affected by other unanalyzed factors.